



## **Lillian Beatrice Brown**

**(1912-2002)**

***Author, community activist, educator, historian, principal and teacher,  
Montgomery County Public School system***

Lillian B. Brown was born in Rockville, Maryland in 1912. The granddaughter of slaves, Brown attended school three miles away from her house on Avery Road, near Lake Needwood. She walked to school everyday. Because of racial segregation, she was not able to attend junior or senior high school in Montgomery County. After moving to Washington, D.C., she attended Shaw Junior High School and Armstrong Senior High School. Brown continued her education earning a diploma from a three-year program at Maryland State Normal College, now Bowie State University, in 1937. In 1951, she earned a B.A. from Morgan State College, and in 1953, she graduated from New York University with a M.A.

Brown started her teaching career in 1938, after she finished her education at Maryland State Normal College. That year, she became both principal and sole teacher at the Germantown Colored Elementary School. Schools in Montgomery County were segregated at that time, and African-American children and white children attended different schools. The one-room school, exclusively for African-American children, had more than 60 students in grades one to seven. In Susan Soberderg's book, *A History of Germantown, Maryland*, Brown recalled the obstacles that she had to overcome as a teacher in Germantown Colored Elementary School. The resources were very limited, and the building was far from being solid and adapted for teaching children. "Our materials were not the best. Our books were tattered and torn and the children often had to share a book for group reading," Brown quoted. The one-room school was heated by a pot-bellied stove fueled by wood and coal.

There were so many cracks in the walls that the wind would blow over Brown's hand as she wrote on the blackboard. The restrooms were outdoors. Water came from a pump located in the yard. Despite the adversities, Brown also recalled the accomplishments of the school community; accomplishments that were due to a strong sense of team effort and vision. "We had a lot of pride in our school," Brown remembered. "We organized a PTA that was second to none in the county. We kept the school in good repair and whitewashed the stones outside and even the trees up to about four feet. The PTA put in electric lights to replace the oil lamps, and during the war, they made one of the cloak rooms into a kitchen complete with stove and refrigerator." Brown remained in the Germantown Colored Elementary School for 11 years.

In 1950, the black elementary schools were consolidated. The Clopper, Germantown, Laytonsville, and Stewarton Elementary Schools were closed. All students were moved to the Emory Grove Consolidated Colored Elementary School in Gaithersburg, named Longview in a contest won by one of Brown's students. The next year, the new Longview Elementary school added a kindergarten program, making Longview the first black school to do so. In 1955, the schools in Maryland were desegregated, and both black and white schools were combined. Longview was desegregated in 1959, and Brown moved to Woodlawn Elementary. Later on, she went to Beall Elementary School in Rockville, where she finished her public

school teaching in 1973.

As a teacher, Brown had a significant influence over her students. During her professional career, she always encouraged her students to go on to high school and continue learning. Many of them did. Some of the students of Germantown Colored Elementary School even became teachers, an achievement in itself, considering that none of the parents of the children at the school had attended high school. Brown passed on the message that students had a responsibility to learn. "The children adopted the attitude that they needed to learn and that this was important to them," Brown is quoted in Soberderg's book.

In recognition of her impact in the life of the Germantown community, its residents recommended the name of Lillian B. Brown for a new local elementary school in 2001. The old Germantown Colored School, although no longer in existence, was located near the site of the new school, and the Naming Committee considered the nomination as an honor to the former principal and teacher. The Montgomery County Board of Education instead selected a different name for the school, over the protests of the Naming Committee and area residents.

Brown received several awards for her life long commitment to teaching and service. She was granted the Legacy of Excellence Award from Bowie State University and the Montgomery County Board of Education's Pioneer Award for Distinguished Service to Public Education in 2001. She co-authored in 1978 with Nina Clarke, *A History of the Black Public Schools of Montgomery County, Maryland 1872–1961*.

Brown lived in Montgomery County, in Chevy Chase, the major part of her life, although she also lived in Washington, D.C. After her retirement, she moved to Rockville, and continued working as a volunteer for children and senior citizens. Brown was active in several clubs, including the Eastern Star, as well in as in her church. She taught Sunday school at Clinton A.M.E. Church in Lincoln Park for 65 years. She was known for being a stylish dresser, coordinating her hat with gloves and pocketbook. She was married three times. Brown loved life and what life had to offer. It is not a coincidence that one of her passions was traveling. She visited every state in the union, every continent except Antarctica, and went on several ocean cruises around the world. Her niece commented to a local newspaper that Brown liked to go to different places and learn how other people lived. "It was part of her willingness to absorb," she reflected.

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## **SOURCES:**

- The Montgomery County Historical Society Library
- Lillian Brown and Nina Clarke, *A History of the Black Public Schools of Montgomery County, Maryland 1872 – 1961*, New York: Vantage Press (1978)
- Susan Soderberg, *A History of Germantown, Maryland*, Germantown, Maryland: Published by the author (1988)
- See also Nina Clarke